

And Along Came Alice

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Summary: Alice Duncan and her closest friend, Freda Kelly, obtain secretarial jobs working for one Mr. B Epstein and his...clients.

1. Prologue

Present Day

Molly Evans-Henry hadn't confronted the attic since her mother had passed nearly four years ago. It wasn't that she was afraid of what was up there; she was almost fifty years old and was hardly frightened by the dark anymore. Rather, she scared of what emotions would be reawakened in her through the action of pulling out those dusty boxes. Molly had finally repressed those feelings and wished not to have them return. However, Freda had called earlier in the week requesting access to the boxes in the attic, and, not raised to be rude, Molly felt obligated to comply. After all, Auntie Freda was her mother's closest friend, had been there for Molly's family for years, so it was only fair to at least try and fulfill her request.

She grabbed the string hanging from the ceiling and pulled, revealing a foldable wooden ladder that led up to the recesses of the uppermost room of her home. She thought briefly about whether or not she could lie to Auntie Freda and say the boxes had been lost, or that her brother still had them, but she steeled herself and began her ascent up the rungs.

The attic was hot, dark, dusty and in need of a good cleaning, but instantly Molly found what she came for: six dust-blanketed boxes all with 'Alice Duncan Evans' emblazoned on the tops in black marker in her mother's hand. Molly grabbed one and left the attic, keeping the ceiling trap open in case this box contained nothing she thought Auntie Freda would need and she'd be forced to uncover the rest of them.

Molly placed the box on the floor of her upstairs hallway and plopped down beside it. Auntie Freda had said that she only needed a few pictures and could root through the boxes herself, but Molly knew her aunt was getting on in age and couldn't possibly be found sitting on a floor about to tear into her mother's preserved memories like she was now. The thought made her chuckle slightly, but then the gravity of the thing she was about to do once again weighed heavily on her heart. Yes, it had been almost five years since Alice had died, but Molly still felt the absence of her mother greatly. Just talking about her made tears spring to her eyes. Had Alice been around she would have jokingly scolded Molly for crying, stating that Evans blood most certainly ran through her as, "Mr and Mrs. Evans always cried," even if they just saw an adorable infant being pushed along in a pram.

Deducing that she was being childish, Molly swallowed back some sadness, steeled herself, and pried open the box. Inside, she found some old magazines boasting cover images of celebrities from long ago, a few photo albums, some records, Alice's wedding photo in a delicate silver frame, a small box that contained some of the little presents her father had given her mother and, finally, a book that Molly had never seen before. It was of cracked, faded brown tooled leather, and was incredibly thick. She flicked through some pages and discovered them all to be handwritten, the dates heading the pages harking back to the sixties, and a tad worn. She realized in her hands she held her mother's old diary, and tears once again threatened to flow. This was what she had wanted to avoid.

Molly quickly shut the journal and practically threw it back into the box. However, a thought intruded her subconscious when she held the book; she wanted to read it, and badly. Insatiable curiosity had always 'plagued' her since she was a child, and this newfound discovery did nothing to squelch that trait. It would be a posthumous invasion of her mother's privacy, she'd decided, reading that diary and learning things about Alice that she perhaps wished to keep a secret.

â€|But what if she was meant to find it? And, really, what kind of trouble could her mother have gotten into? She was a traveling secretary and personal assistant for one Mr. B. Epstein, for God's sake! Molly stuck her hand back in the box again, groping around for the diary once more. Instead, she pulled out a piece of paper that was in the way of her getting the book. However, a piece of paper it was not, but a picture, and upon further inspection Molly recognized her mother, a blushing beauty of perhaps eighteen, sitting on the lap of a young George Harrison, the rest of the Beatles surrounding her! Molly flipped the picture around and read the inscription on the back: 'To our lovely Alice Duncan, without whom we'd all be lost,' and then in a smaller, more scribbly hand, "â€|or dead, luv John."

Molly plunged her hand back into the box and uncovered the diary once more, curiosity and questions overcoming her sadness and reservation. How did her mother become so close with the Beatles, of all people? What exactly was her occupation in the sixties? Sensing there was much more to her mother than met the eye, Molly cracked open the book and began to readâ€|

October 23, 1962

I'd always loved NEMS, ever since I was a little girl. I remember Dad used to take Ritchie and I there on Saturday afternoons just before lunchtime. I used to run my hands over all the neatly stacked LPs in their plastic jackets, enjoying the squeaky sound my fingers made when I brushed them against the covers. I was allowed to pick a record every other Saturday. I think my first was Al Martino's "Here in My Heart." I played that 45 until it was ruined, much to mum's delight. When Dad lost his job and pocket money was a bit scarce, we stopped visiting the store, but I still loved it just the same._

I never actually thought I'd be working for NEMS. Well, not NEMS exactly, but for the co-owner of the company. I know that if I had had the ability to tell five-year-old Alice, the one who was always focused on flipping through the huge metal bins of albums, that when she would be seventeen she'd be working at her favorite shop, she'd be thrilled!_

I smoothed out the sensible brown, tweed twin set I'd borrowed from my cousin Dorothea as my gaze settled on the upstairs window above them NEMS storefront; the window known to belong to Mr. Epstein's office. I choked down some nervousness as I realized that in a mere twenty minutes I'd be up there, about to be interviewed for the position of my dreams. I took in a few deep breaths and began to make my way across the rain-sodden road to the big double doors of the shop. This is it, I thought, then pulled a door open and stepped inside.

The main floor of NEMS wasn't as I'd remembered itâ€|much more modern now, and I could only assume that was because of Mr. Epstein. Well, not the Mr. Epstein, but his young son, Brian, who took over the business a few years back. The metal record bins had since been replaced with racks and shelves. There was a wall that contained what looked to be dressing rooms, but were actually listening booths. And there were teenagers everywhere, all looking to be around my age, grabbing copies of the latest edition of a popular music magazine, some admiring the polished guitars and basses that adorned the wall, awaiting purchase.

I walked to where I felt the most comfortable: the record department. I flipped through some Elvis, considered buying a replacement for my worn and tired out Ray Charles album, then moved along. Coming across a brightly colored end-cap that boasted the latest on the music scene, I examined a single by a group that called themselves The Beatles. There was only one stack of 45s on display, 'Love Me Do' coupled with 'My Bonnie', and supply was running critically low. Who were they? Their name sounded very familiar, but their faces I could not place. I faintly remembered Freda mentioning them, but had yet to hear them play. She said she'd loved them from the first time she'd heard them at the Cavern, a club I hadn't even visited although I passed it almost everyday. She said they were going to do things that were going to take them far away from Liverpool. Maybe to the United States, even, if they were lucky.

I checked my watch (also borrowed from Dorothea) and realized that if I didn't hurry upstairs, I'd be late for my appointment. Quickly, I asked a young sales clerk where I could find Mr. Epstein's office and he pointed to a staircase at the far end of the store. I booked it

and took a seat in an olive green plastic chair once I'd made it to the reception area, which was closed off from the main office by a metal door. The place was sparsely furnished and neat, had just gotten a fresh coat of paint on the walls, but it was empty. Maybe I arrived too early? Maybe the other applicants had interviewed in the days prior to my visit? Whatever the case, it made my nerves worse. I smoothed out my skirt again, hoping to erase any trace of the unprofessional clamminess in my hands. This is it, I thought.

Suddenly, the metal door swung open (exactly at 1:35 pm, just as my appointment card had specified) to reveal Mr. Brian Epstein, perhaps the youngest entrepreneur in Liverpool. He was only 28, very posh-looking, yet his presence demanded respect. His suit was navy and pressed carefully, his loafers looked brand-new. He was smiling slightly, but in a cordial way; not exactly happy to see me because he hardly knew me.

"Ms. Duncan, I presume?" he asked, extending his right hand as I stood up to meet him.

"Yes, sir. Alice Duncan," I replied, giving that hand what I hoped to be a steady handshake.

Mr. Epstein then turned around and led me into his office. The walls had a few family photographs on them, some awards for NEMS, perhaps a college degree of his somewhere among the certificates in their beautiful frames. The window behind the desk looked out onto the street, where I was almost a half hour ago. There was an extensive set of encyclopedia housed in a shelf to my right. Mr. Epstein directed me to sit in a plump leather chair right before his desk, at which he sat and pulled over a sheet of paper.

"Ms. Duncan, the birthdate on your application is a bit smudged," he said, trying to examine the date I'd purposely ruined. I didn't want him to turn me down because I was seventeen, which had happened to me before. I needed this job.

"My apologies, sir. The date should read January 12, 1944," I half-lied.

"And you worked as a laundress?"

"Yes, sir, for two years, at Templeton Tailors and Wash in the Dingle."

He looked at the paper once more. "Why didn't you hold onto the job?"

"I was tired of burning my fingers on the iron, sir," I replied, a bit sheepishly.

This earned me a more genuine smile than before, and then he read more of my application in silence. It felt like an hour later when he finally rested the paper back on the desk. He laced his fingers together and looked at me.

"Are you any good at typing?"

"I take a typing class on the weekends. I'm very close to reaching

500 words per minute."

"And how is your punctuality? Your ability to follow written and oral instructions? Can you make appointments, and do you have your driver's license?"

The questions came in rapid succession, and I answered them all quickly. The only thing I had to admit I couldn't do, or, rather, didn't have, was my driver's license. Nobody in my family aside from my father had one, and the rest of us just took the public bus. Epstein considered this. I wasn't sure if my lack of driving experience was going to hurt my chances of getting this secretarial position.

Finally he spoke again. "What do you know about The Beatles?"

That was an odd question, and it took me a bit by surprise. Other than what Freda had fleetingly told me? Other than seeing their single in the store just a few minutes ago? I knew absolutely nothing. One of them could mug me in the street, and I'd be none the wiser. What did this have to do with my job?

"I saw them in the Cavern Club recently," I lied again. "I bought their single, too."

"And what did you think of them?" he asked, this time more seriously.

I didn't know what to say, really. "Very nice sound they've got. I think they're going to be huge."

His smile was bigger this time. He leaned back in his chair, never taking his eyes off of me. I wondered if he knew I lied twice.

"Ms. Duncan, I believe you'll make a fine addition to this company. As part of your assistance to me, you'll be working very closely with the Beatles and will be handling their affairs. You need to be in here every weekday from eight in the morning to five at night, ready to take notes, answer phones, make appointments for the group, travel with them, and aid me in my NEMS duties when I need you. Weekend hours may need to be put in, depending on the band's schedule."

I was thrilled. Beyond thrilled, actually. I was ecstatic.

"I pay well, and there are a few benefits. I can forward all checks to your home address, correct?"

I nodded and hoped my face didn't convey just how excited I was. I was supposed to be professional, not a giddy schoolgirl. Mr. Epstein wrote down a few things on a legal pad at his side, then pulled a packet out from a drawer in his desk. He placed the papers in front of me, then handed over a pen.

"Please sign your contract, Ms. Duncan," he said, and watched as I did so.

He collected it and placed it in a waiting manilla folder. Mr. Epstein stood and I followed in suit. He extended his hand to me again, and I shook it.

"You start on Monday. I'm pleased to have you with us. Now if you'll excuse me!" he said, then opened the door for me to leave, mumbling something about lunch meetings with record companies and the like.

I thanked him one last time and then, in an exuberant daze, made my way downstairs to the NEMS shop. Before leaving I walked back to the end cap where I'd seen the Beatles' single and purchased it on the spot.

I had to call Freda.

End
file.